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THE DECORATION OF CEILINGS.

BY G. T. ROBINSON, F. S. A.

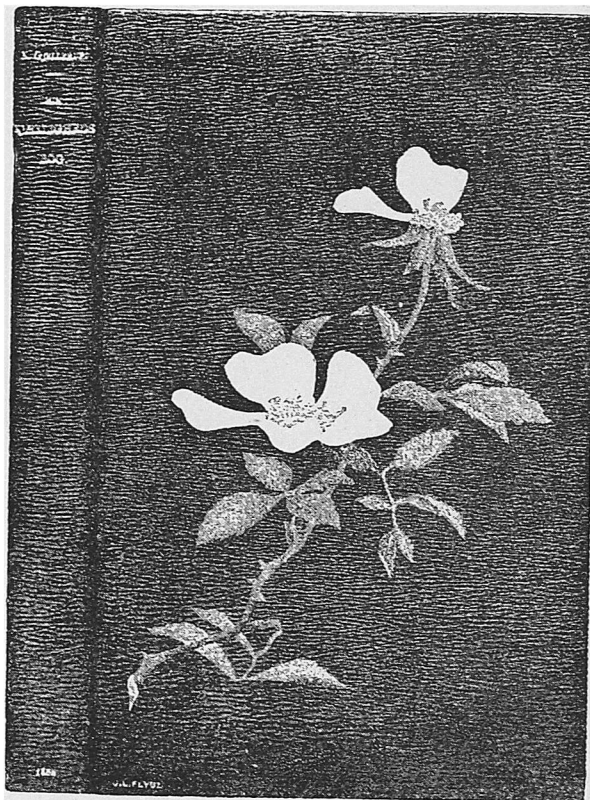


WHAT shall we do with our ceilings? That, indeed, is a serious question. In fact, the difficulty of answering it has too frequently crushed its consideration, and so nothing is done and they are left in gaunt nakedness to dominate over luxurious walls and gayly clad floors. Yet, when you consider that the ceiling of a room is the largest unbroken area it possesses, it is evident that its tasteful treatment is one which ought to be well considered and accomplished. And in periods of good art, by which I mean when art was felt to be a necessary adjunct to life, this has always been done. Go back so far as you will, you will always find that until the commencement of the nineteenth century—or rather until early in the century's career—the ceiling secured at least as much, and frequently more, artistic consideration than either the walls or the floor. Egyptian, Greek, Persian, Roman, Byzantine, Mediaeval, and all the varied phases of the Renaissance styles show us how the artists of those periods revelled in the adornment of their ceilings; nor, until the stern severity of the pseudo-Grecian phase, which, darkening the early years of the present century, cast its gloom over English art, were these ever neglected in our own country. From the gloom we have emerged. "The Gothic Revival," albeit some of those who have not lived

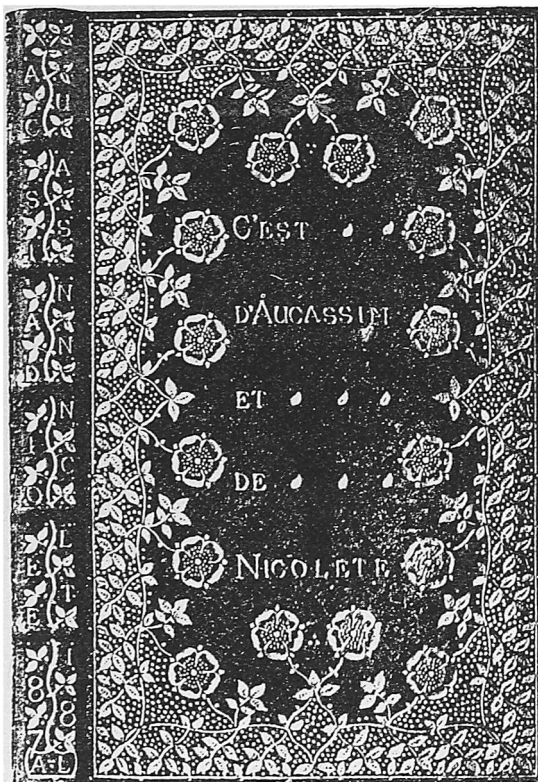
through it now scoff at it, did us that good service—it taught us that to have our ceilings bald, barren, and naked was not

only uncharitable neglect but a grievous blunder. The first essays in the Anglo-Dutch style—miscalled Queen Anne—did not do much to help, but the feebleness of that scrap-book eclecticism, by which this strange hybrid was begotten, manifested itself in its weak-minded progeny, and the truer insight into the need of homogeneity in decoration now dawning has more fully taught the lesson that the ceiling has a decorative function to perform which demands the most careful consideration.

How careful that consideration should be will be apparent when you reflect on the many things it has to embrace. The first is the structural condition in which you find it, and



BOOK COVER IN LEATHER MOSAIC. DESIGNED BY L. FLYGE.



GOLD STAMPED BOOK COVER. DESIGNED BY T. J. COBDEN SANDERSON.

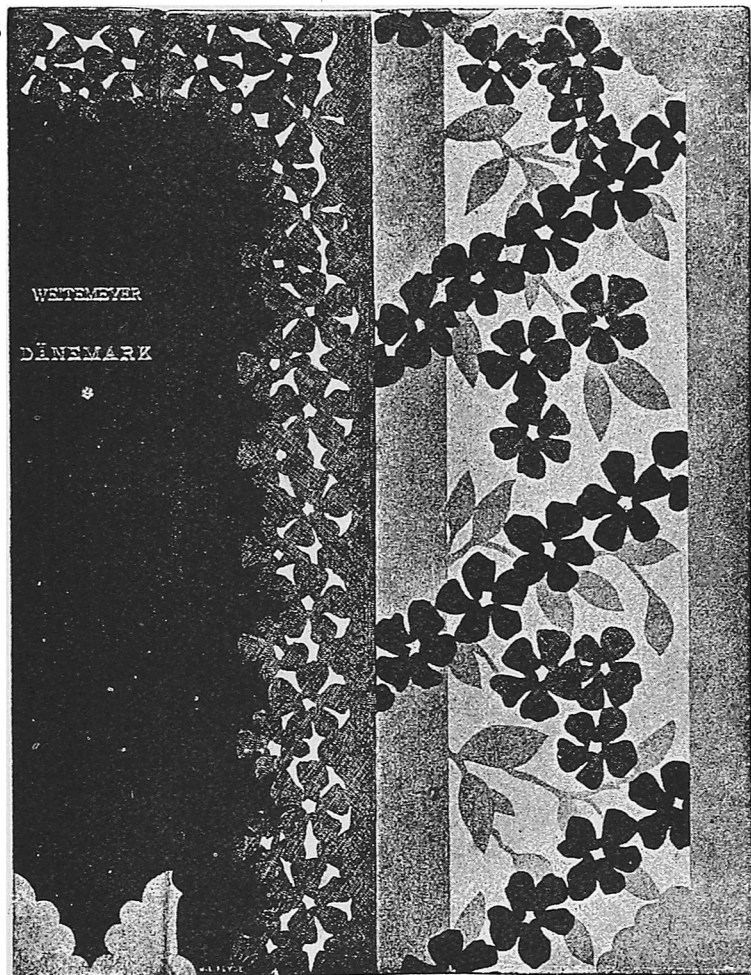
secondly, its relative proportion to the walls of the room. Then comes the question as to how it receives its light by day, whether from the ends or side, or both, and the quantity of that light. Thus, for example, a long low room lighted from one end naturally demands an entirely different ceiling treatment from a wide high room lighted from the side. Nor should the mode of artificial lighting by night be unthought of, for the true value of your design depends equally upon each of these considerations. You have then to consider the purport of the room, the style of the treatment of the other decoration, and not least important of all, the amount of money you are intending to spend upon it. Herein we are sad niggards, and the ceilings of foreign houses are much more generously treated than with us. Floors and walls we treat lavishly, but the poor ceiling is too often left with the scantiest of covering. Two causes have no doubt combined to reduce our ceilings to this state of destitution: The one being an unsettled state of tenancy, and the other the dirt generated by impure gas or ill-trimmed oil lamps; but the advent of electric lighting bids fair to remove the latter, which has certainly been a just reason for not placing our best work there; indeed the dreariest period of ceiling denudation dates from the introduction of gas, about 1814, so that now that it is to disappear from the principal apartments of our dwellings, we may reasonably hope for the resuscitation of this important branch of decorative art.

Having thus noted some of the primary considerations as to any decoration of the ceiling, our first question reiterates itself with a slight difference. It is now—*how* shall we decorate our ceilings? There are two principal methods of doing so. First, the formative; secondly, the colored; and these can be combined—indeed are better so. If you are constructing a new ceiling, decidedly the best plan is to have it modelled in stucco or gesso *in situ*, by which means it can be suited to the form,

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height, and the quality of light, and be an individual and appropriate work of art.

It was by this means that the best ceilings were constructed. Both the more elaborate ones of Italy and France, and the simpler ones, from the time of Henry VIII., when the art was first introduced into England, until the middle of the XVIII. century. I mention this long career of about three hundred



BOOK COVER IN LEATHER MOSAIC. DESIGNED BY H. BINDESBØLL.

years to show how modelled stucco work suited itself to every change of fashion which occurred during that long and changeable time, and to demonstrate how plastic, in both senses of the word, it is, so that anything from the richest figure work to the simplest ornamental detail can be done in it. As I am writing for the average home, I will not now consider the sumptuous palaces of Italy or France, but briefly refer to some of those examples of the formative ceiling found in England, which are suitable as suggestive examples; and as an early illustration refer in the first instance to the one still remaining in the Star Hotel, Yarmouth. This is earlier, perhaps, in design than in date, retaining as it does a very large amount of that late "Gothic" feeling which was gradually being supplanted by the incoming Renaissance brought by those Italian stucco workers, whom Henry VIII. induced to visit England for the decoration of the now vanished palace of Nonesuch. The room shown in the illustration was the principal apartment in the house of an old merchant of the time of Elizabeth, and affords good evidence of the wealth and taste of the merchant adventurers of those days, who, between legitimate trading and a taste for privateering, laid the foundations of the commercial prosperity and the naval supremacy of England. The ceiling, it will be seen, is divided into square compartments, each filled with a slightly concave panel, ornamented by flamboyant tracery, from the centre of which depends a radial pendentive boss.

There is a very interesting example of an early Elizabethan ceiling in the replica of one recently added to that treasure-house, the South Kensington Museum. This is taken from a moderate sized room in Sizergh Hall, in Westmoreland, where, with the original inlaid wainscot, it presents to us a good exam-

ple of a parlor or with drawing-room of the early years of the reign of Queen Elizabeth. It is a ceiling of pendentive character, a type peculiar to England, and which hardly exist in any other country, and seems to be a free translation of the stone fan-groining which formed so distinctive a character of the late Gothic vaulting in the reigns of Henry VII. and Henry VIII. If you have not already seen this, it is quite worth your while to do so, as it is a generic specimen, and the geometric distribution of the small ribs is very suggestive of other arrangements either with or without the pendants. As you see it in the reproduction it is simply in the white plaster, but these English ceilings were resplendent in color and gold, and always excited the admiration of foreign critics. Spenser tells us that

"Gold was the parges, and the ceiling bright
Did shine all scaly with great plates of gold."

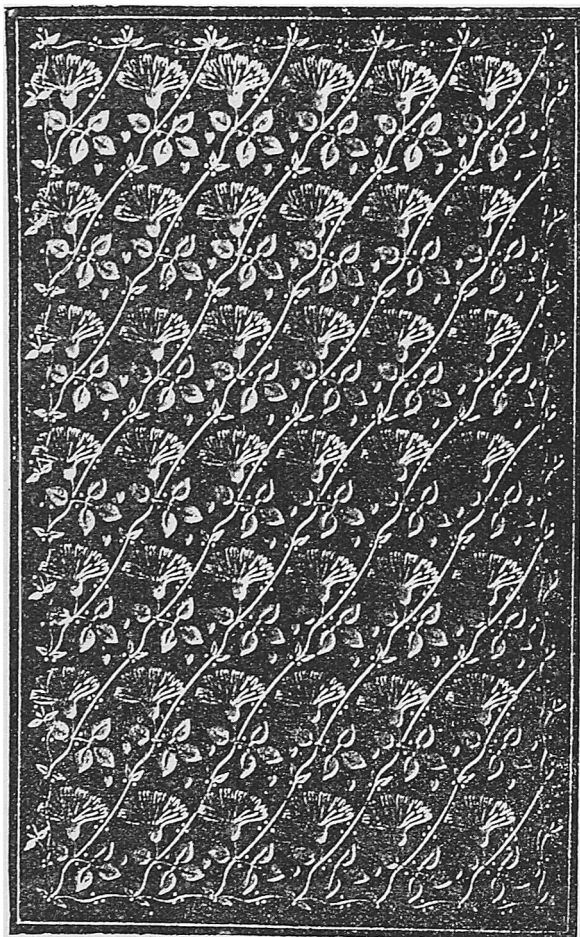
And I have frequently found traces of gorgeous coloring and rich gilding beneath the successive generations of whitewash which blunt and blur the delicate moulding our forefathers bequeathed to us. The ribbed division of the ceiling developed itself into an infinite variety of geometric combinations of squares, octagons and circles, and you have only to turn over the pages of Nash's "Mansions," or any work treating of the domestic interiors of the times of Elizabeth and James I., to find innumerable suggestions for the recombination of a few simple figures arranged in almost infinite variety. There are many examples of the use of the "square quatrefoil," in Scotland, dating from the time of James I. and VI., in whose reign these formative stucco ceilings were introduced into that kingdom, and where this particular figure of the square quatrefoil became preeminently popular, though it is by no means rare in English work. At first sight it is somewhat



DECORATED PARCHMENT COVER FOR ADDRESS TO KING CHRISTIAN IX. OF DENMARK.

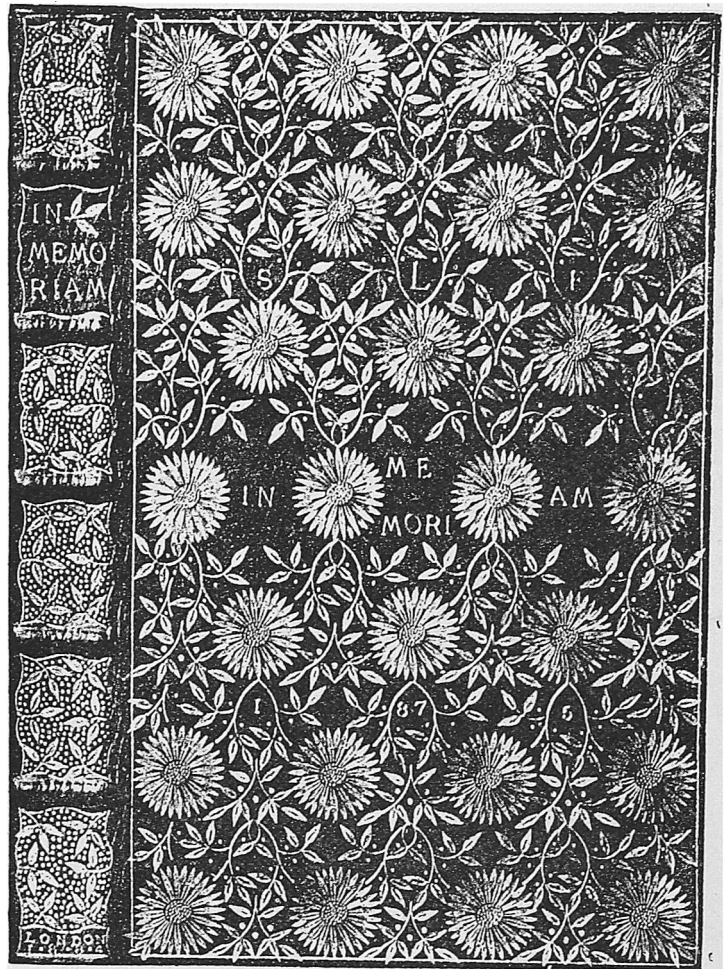
difficult to recognize that the basis of each of these combinations is precisely the same. In the first, which is taken from the Binns Castle, Linlithgow, the quatrefoil is complete, the cusps abutting upon a square; in the second, which comes from Winton House, the quatrefoil is simply severed at the points of the cusps and elongated by the addition of a straight bar, which is again connected to the central square by rectangular

ribs. There were many other combinations of this quartrefoil arrangement, a favorite one allowing the square angles of it to overlap each other in a greater or less degree; or by simply touching at their angles. The ribs which formed these figures were at first simply moulded, the modelled ornament being placed on the field of the ceiling, as shown on the design on this page, where the octagon is the principal form, and which is taken from a ceiling at Burton Kirk. Here the spaces between the reticulation of the ribs are somewhat small, so the ornament with which the field of the ceiling is charged is somewhat simple, but where the cannon was larger important pieces of basso-relievo were attempted, such as achievements of arms, rebuses of quaint allusiveness, scenes from classic or Biblical history, the initials of the husband and wife twined with a true lover's knot and many a pretty fancy. This surcharging of the field caused the merely moulded ribs to appear too meagre, and this reiteration of the same shaped space was then found to be too restrictive. Moreover, the disadvantage that the geometric pattern did not work equally to the edges of the ceiling, unless



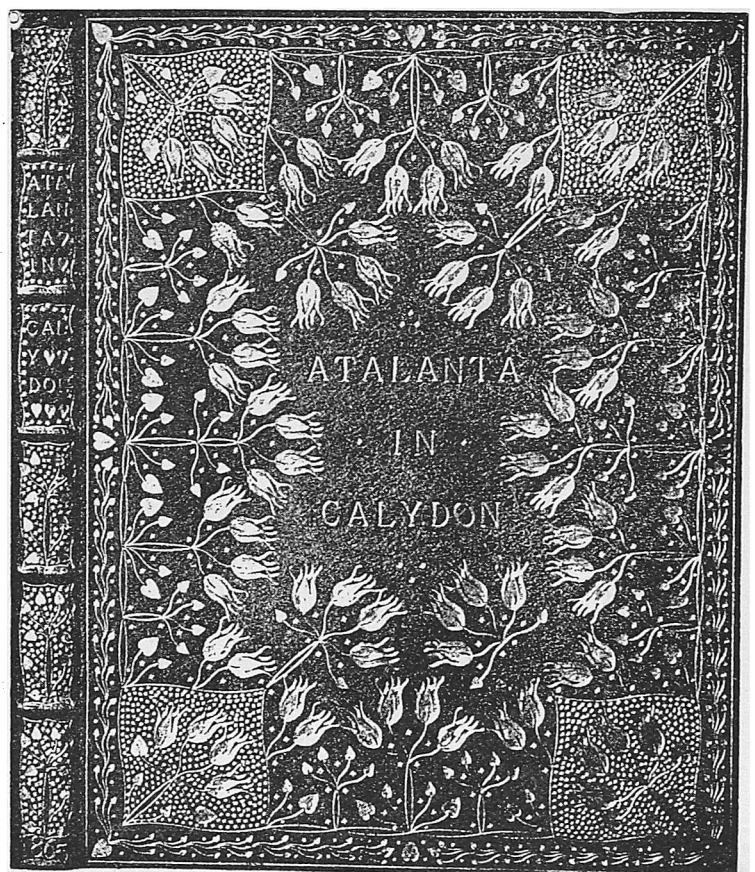
ENGLISH BOOK COVER. DESIGNED AND EXECUTED BY T. J. COBDEN SANDERSON.

that area could be divided into equal squares, made itself more manifest as the size and shape of the rooms developed themselves; so the ceiling then came to be divided into four equal parts, each part filled with some convoluted figure meeting in the common centre, which was usually emphasized by some moulded or floriated pendant. Nor did the large size of some of our old stately rooms deter the bold attempt, for I know rooms in which the drawing of the pattern for one of these quarters is eleven yards long and five yards wide, filled with admirable drawn curves or meandering lines, involved and contorted with quaint unexpected quips and cranks, a true parallel to the quaintly involved literary diction of the time. Lord Braybooke's study at Audley End affords an example in a room some forty feet long and twenty feet wide—so that the drawing of the pattern is twenty feet long and ten feet wide, the meandering line being admirably distributed, leaving no empty spaces nor undue crowding in any part. Nor were these ribs merely moulded as in the earlier examples of the pendentive ceiling before referred to; they were frequently broad and flat, with moulded edges, and on the surface was impressed a fine and delicate ornamentation, produced from a rolling wheel like a book-binder's tool, or impressed by wooden moulds. Such a



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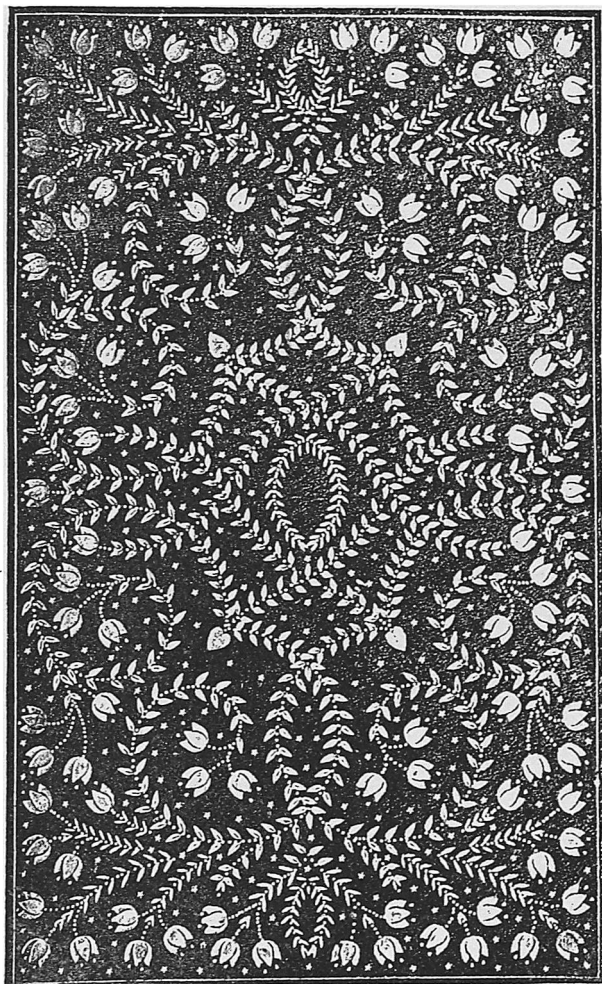
treatment is shown in the boudoir of that same fine old mansion, Audley End—a house abounding in marvellous examples of modelled ceiling, all of which were executed about 1615.



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The severe feeling of the Palladian architecture introduced by Inigo Jones, in Charles I's time restrained this somewhat too redundant ornament, and large surfaces were left for painting, severe architectural distribution being the formative character of the plaster work. The troubles which during the Cromwellian interregnum beset the country, however, checked all this. And in the time of Charles II. a reversion to a more decorative character of ceiling took place, partly because of the enforced baldness and severity of Puritan times, and partly because so many of the once more wealthy class had been living abroad, where this Spartan discipline had not been felt. Wreaths of natural flowers and combinations of circular form now prevailed, and in almost all the ceilings of this time you will find rectangular distribution absent. The illustration given on this page shows to what extravagant excess this naturalistic treatment was carried—beauty of minute detail being considered quite irrespective of general effect—for all the floral work is charmingly executed. Of this class of work more restricted and better composed, you will find good specimens in the church of King Charles the Martyr at Tunbridge Wells. With the formal



ENGLISH BOOK COVER. DESIGNED AND EXECUTED BY T. J. CORDEN SANDERSON.

Dutch feeling introduced so largely during the reigns of William III. and Queen Anne, the prevalence of rectangular forms again returned, the ceilings then having generally rectangular panels around the outsides with a circular panel in the centre, this being filled with well modelled and often very interesting bassi-relievi, whilst the rectangular ones were filled with conventional ornament. Of this date a very charming ceiling designed by Sir Christopher Wren, in which painting and modelling are combined, exists in the Board Room of the New River Water Company. A little later on the influence of the French taste became generally manifest and the imitative translation of the Louis XV. style popularized in England by the designs of Chippendale, Lock, and others. Many of these ceilings yet exist in one or two houses in London, though, as fashion has migrated from its old quarters, they are but seldom seen by those who can appreciate them. Of the more mechanical means adopted which succeeded the truer mode of decora-

tion, and of our modern means of decoration, I must treat in another article.

IN the old posters of Cromwell's time we find a shelf running across the bed, just above the sleeper's head—placed there for the posset cup. This is now utilized with a safety lamp, for those who indulge in the pernicious practice of reading in bed; but it is even better used as a receptacle for the book, the letter case, the many little things which an invalid may need, and saves calling a nurse.

A BEDROOM has a dado of lignumur representing an interlacing of carved oak, which is divided into panels by carved mouldings of real oak. The wall is divided into invisible panels, a tipped flat with a robin's egg blue tint, with an outside stiling similarly tinted, but showing a lustre. There is a stereo relief frieze in which finely molded female figures are seen swimming like mermaids, their draperies blending into the ground, the whole being decorated in various tones of terra cotta.

THE honeysuckle is a very graceful decoration, and the variety of coloring in the flowers makes it particularly pleasing. The dark green of the leaves contrasts well with the pale pinks and buffs of the flowers. When the flowers first bloom they are a pale pink, with a deeper pink on the outside of the calyx. As they grow older the flower deepens to a strong buff color. The leaves are a dark green and rather lustrous. A paler green on the outside of the foliage sets off the dark color.

THERE is no doubt at the present day that the multiplicity of fancy workers show a preference for work that is showy and effective, and which is produced quickly, with small expenditure of either time or trouble. A new idea, not for shading but for effect, is the use of a very heavy silk in a new stitch which achieves this and the result is most pleasing. The foundation is in Roman sheeting of the finest quality and artistic colors, the designs are admirable and a great many gold spangles are used in carrying them out.

A novelty is a telescopic dining table which is made to expand, as well as to stretch out in the usual way. To obtain this end the two rounded ends are made to separate like the center, but in opposite directions, so as to allow also for the insertion of short leaves whenever required. This way of widening a table on the same principle as it is lengthened is likely to be appreciated by those who enjoy the luxury of spacious rooms.

To color a ceiling, or to divide it by means of projecting ribs or mouldings, is not to lower it, as is commonly supposed. It is easily shown in argument, as it is constantly exemplified in practice, that the opposite effect is quite as often produced, color being the determining agent. Assume the wall of a small library twelve feet high to be hung with embossed leather paper in brown and gold, or, perhaps a warm green-ground, the bookcases below of oak, or walnut, with their contents maintaining a quite similarity of tone. The cornice is, say nine inches deep. If you leave it a light tint and the ceiling plain, the room will appear quite nine inches lower than it would were the cornice brown like the bookcase, and if the room is continued on to the ceiling by means of wooden ribs, the room will gain at least another five inches of apparent height. The fact is that the point at which the attention is arrested by a marked contrast is that by which the eye assesses the height.

SQUARES of velveteen are now printed with extremely bold patterns in the Indian style, and are well suited for covers for cushions, or for small tables. It is intended that the pattern shall be outlined and partly filled in with silks and gold thread. The manner of managing the colors must depend upon the velveteen. If this is printed in two shades of one color only, the tints of the embroidery may be many and so arranged that the stitches cover the background wholly in places. Should the velveteen itself be somewhat gay, the stitches should repeat the main tints of the pattern, which need be only partially covered by them. Similar squares are to be had in printed cotton, but as may be easily understood, the embroidery does not show to such good advantage upon them as upon velveteen.